

THE MARINE CORPS' DEEP BATTLE: CAREER FORCE RETENTION


"Recruiting is hard work, retention is equally so." - CMC, ALMAR 011/00

By Major Brent W. Goodrum (MPP-20, HQMC)

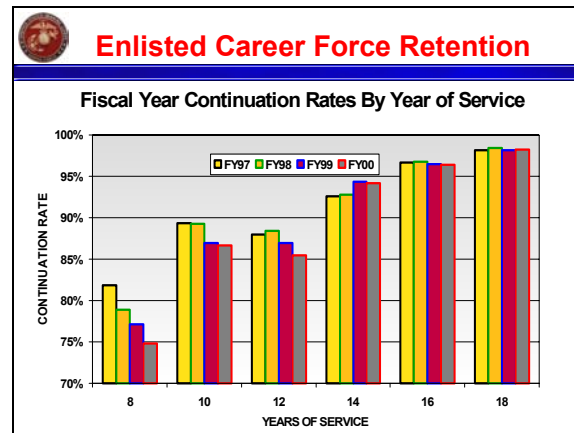
The late 1990's represented some lean recruiting and retention years for many of the Armed Services who sought to compete with the red-hot American job market. The Marine Corps stood alone as the only service to hit both its accession and retention targets throughout these difficult years. Much of the Corps' success can rightfully be attributed to the absolute strength and determination of the Marine Corps' recruiting effort. Additionally, commanders and career planners successfully reenlisted an ever-increasing number of first term Marines at the First Term Alignment Plan (FTAP). By early 2000, however, it was becoming clear to senior Marine Corps leadership that something else needed to be done in order to help alleviate pressure that was being forcibly applied to recruiters, career planners, and commanders in order to meet end strength requirements. In February of 2000 the Commandant of the Marine Corps announced that the Marine Corps was facing its greatest retention challenge in recent years (ALMAR 011/00). In March of that same year the Commandant directed an unprecedented Corps-wide two-day retention stand down in order to, first, galvanize efforts in order to attain the difficult FY00 first term mission and secondly, concentrate on career retention (ALMAR 017/00). In short, retention in the Marine Corps had come to a crisis.

PRECURSORS TO A CRISIS

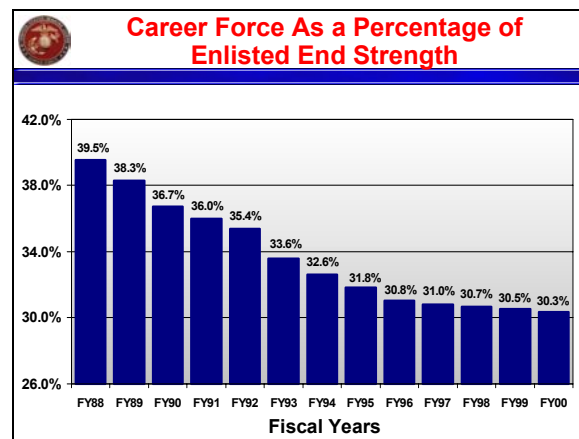
Over-population in the Career Force (defined as those Marines serving on a second or greater enlisted contract) and a significant slow down of promotion timing in the Staff NCO grades ushered in the FTAP in 1989. The drawdown in the early 1990s and the desire for career force Marines to continue on active duty maintained a low retention requirement at the FTAP. In 1993, the Corps only brought 3,264 first term Marines or 13.4% of the first term, End of Active Service (EAS) population over into the career force. Since then, the FTAP mission had increased every year. By fiscal year 2000 the FTAP requirement had nearly doubled from 1993 to 5,787 representing 26.0% of the first term EAS population.

 FTAP History / Trends			
<u>FY</u>	<u>EAS Pop.</u>	<u>FTAP#</u>	<u>Agg. % of EAS</u>
93	24,301	3,264	13.4%
94	22,018	4,004	18.2%
95	20,943	4,057	19.4%
96	22,072	4,296	19.5%
97	24,000	4,600	19.2%
98	21,824	4,634	21.2%
99	23,832	5,472	22.9%
00	22,294	5,787	26.0%

The reason for the increasing FTAP mission can be attributed to the steady increase in the number of career force Marines departing the enlisted ranks to explore other opportunities, particularly those in the 8-12 year of service window.



As a result, the career force had shrunk from 39.5% of the enlisted force at the end of Fiscal Year 1988 to its smallest percentage to date in fiscal year 2000 at 30.3%. (Although not formalized, it is believed that the career force should comprise roughly 1/3 of the enlisted force.)



Thus, senior leaders were left to combat three concurrent and related problems: 1) decreasing career force continuation rates 2) escalating FTAP missions and 3) a shrinking career force.

THE WAY AHEAD... THE MARINE CORPS' DEEP BATTLE

The retention crisis of early 2000 forged four separate and supporting endeavors. First, an Enlisted Retention Task Force (ERTF) was chartered by the Deputy Commandant, Manpower & Reserve Affairs in March 2000 to analyze and provide solutions to current and future retention issues.

Membership includes key agencies involved in the retention process of all enlisted Marines. Since its inception, the ERTF has provided solutions to numerous issues involving retention policy, reenlistment incentives, and the career force planning.

Second, senior Marine Corps leaders wanted to leverage Marine Corps Recruiting Command's program of systematic recruiting and apply a similar approach to the equally challenging field of retention. The ERTF tackled this issue, deciding that the best way to implement a systematic program for retention was to create a professional career planner force. Previously, unit career planners were SNCOs serving on a three-year B-billet. Through the ERTF, M&RA developed a primary MOS for career planners (8421) and changed their title to Career Retention Specialist (CRS). CRS is a lateral move MOS ranging in rank from Sergeant through Master Gunnery Sergeant. With the implementation of 8421 as a PMOS, once a Marine becomes a CRS, he/she remains a CRS for the rest of his/her career. When the CRS primary MOS was established, a cadre of instructors was gathered, a new course curriculum was drafted, and the old Career Planner School was moved to MCRD San Diego to be co-located with the Recruiter School. Since the 8421 PMOS became effective on 1 Oct 2002, over 130 CRSs have graduated from the new course and over 220 Marines carry the new PMOS. The transition to an all-CRS force will take approximately three years.

Third, in order to compete for the valuable skills of our Marines within critically short MOSs, the Marine Corps was the only service to boldly adopt a policy of lump sum payment of the Selective Reenlistment Bonus (SRB) in FY01. By granting lump sum payments, Marines in SRB eligible MOSs would receive 100% of their SRB bonus upfront. In addition to this lump sum payment policy, the Marine Corps gave Marines the opportunity to maximize the SRB payment by reenlisting for a full 48-month contract beyond the end of their current contract. Finally, the "internal to the Marine Corps" SRB payment ceilings for SRB Zones B and C were raised from \$20,000 to \$35,000. The Zone A ceiling remained capped at \$30,000. These programs were so successful in FY01 that nearly all the \$45 million budgeted for FY01 SRB payments was used to retain first term Marines. (Historically, SRB monies were allocated during the first quarter of the fiscal year to first term critically short MOSs and just a handful of critically short career force MOSs. SRB monies remaining after the first quarter were then reallocated to other critically short MOS skills that resided in the career force.)

Fourth, in FY02 the Marine Corps sought to actively engage the population that had been departing at an ever-increasing rate: career force Marines. The Subsequent Term Alignment Plan (STAP) was envisioned to be a focused, supporting attack to the Corps' long-standing FTAP efforts. Manpower planners anticipated that successful retention of career force Marines by grade and skill would initially stabilize the ever-increasing FTAP mission. Over a longer time horizon, a successful STAP campaign would eventually drive future FTAP missions lower, to more manageable levels. Along the way, the Marine Corps would expect to close the gap between its force inventory and its requirement by both grade and skill and retain the invaluable experience and leadership that its career force possessed.

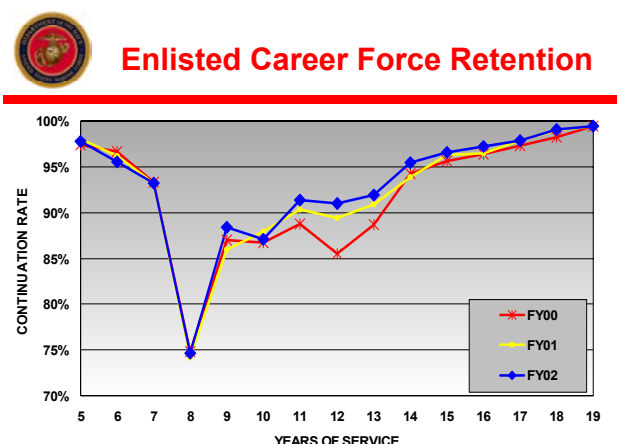
STAP IMPLEMENTATION

One of the most contentious, but necessary, steps to make in the implementation of STAP was the redistribution of the SRB money. Recall that in FY01 almost all of the \$45 Million SRB budget was utilized in the retention efforts of the Corps' first term Marines. After much discussion and analysis a decision was made to allocate the general support SRB monies 60/40 between the first term (Zone A) and career force (Zones B and C) retention efforts in FY02.

Additionally, unlike previous years, these SRB monies would be available to critically short career force MOSs from the very onset of the fiscal year. Banking on the expected return/success of the career force retention effort, FY02's FTAP mission was reduced from its projected number of almost 6,200 to 5,900... a reduction in both the total number of first term reenlistments and as a percentage of the aggregate EAS population from FY01. This necessary reduction of the FTAP mission was viewed as pragmatic given the added STAP mission levied upon our commanders for the retention of our career force Marines. Lastly, a STAP road show was planned and executed to help get the word out on the career retention focus. Stops for the road show included: MARFORLANT, II MEF, MARFORRES, MATCOM, MCRD PI, MCRD San Diego, I MEF, MARFORPAC, and CBIRF. (The unfortunate and tragic events of September 11, 2001 precluded the road show from continuing on to III MEF.)

FY02 RETENTION EXECUTION

The absolute success of FY02's retention efforts can be quantified in many ways. FY02's FTAP mission was attained prior to the end of June with a 99.2% by MOS attainment, the highest MOS attainment since the inception of the FTAP program. Over 7,450 career force Sergeants, Staff Sergeants, and Gunnery Sergeants reenlisted in the inaugural STAP mission in FY02. 191 MOSs (or 96.4% of MOSs) hit or exceeded their STAP targets for FY02. Additionally, significant increases in the continuation rates of career force Marines in years of service 9-14 were realized.



CONTINUE THE FIGHT... SUSTAIN THE MOMENTUM

Prior to the kickoff of the FY03 FTAP mission, HQMC had already received approximately 4,900 first term Reenlistment Extension Lateral Move (RELM) requests for approximately 6,000 first term boatspaces. Although the FTAP mission increased marginally from FY02, the aggregate percentage of the first term EAS population required to reenlist declined to the lowest level (25.2%) since FY 1999. Vigilance, determination, and leadership attention focused on our quality career force Marines will continue to best position the Marine Corps for continued success in the coming years.